

WILBUR'S PLACE IN THE SUN

Continued from page 8



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a nickel shield. "I saw the place all lighted up, thought there must be a dinner party on, and just strolled in."

"Huh!" says I. "Somewhat fishy, Brother. Who found those footprints in the slush for the ladies?"

"I did," says he. "Couldn't have been some you'd made yourself, eh?" says I.

"You saw the heel marks, didn't you?" says he. "I have on rubbers, you see."

"Ye-e-es," says I, inspectin' 'em thoughtful. "Take 'em off."

"But—but look here!" he objects. "Why should I—"

"Take 'em off!" I orders snappy, and helps him with the operation.

And I finds the soles of his shoes damp and muddy.

"Well?" says I. "I—I wasn't wearing the rubbers at first, you see," he explains. "I had them in my pocket. But I put them on before I came through the gates. If you don't believe what I say, though—why I'll be going, I guess."

"Not yet," says Twombly-Crane. "You came in here and told a cock-and-bull story about seeing a burglar, frightened the ladies, and led them about in an absurd chase through the grounds. Now I don't believe a word of your tale—not a word, Sir!"

"Nor I," puts in the Countess. "My jewels were perfectly safe all the time. And my feet are soaking. I've a good notion to shake you, you wretch!"

"What if the fellow's a burglar himself?" suggests Cousin Kemp.

"He ought to be put in jail, at least," says Sister Ann decided.

Things was lookin' squally for the gent, and he was shrinkin' down nervous in his chair as they groups threatenin' around him, when I interferences.

"First off," says I, "you ladies ought to go change your shoes and stockin's, or you'll all have double pneumonia. Leave him to me and see what I can pump out."

"Be careful," says Mrs. Twombly-Crane. "He may be a desperate character."

"Oh, he's all of that," says I, grinnin' at the gent. "Ain't you, now? Come, let's go off somewhere where you can tell me all about it."

WITH that I lifts him up by his collar and leads him into the lib'ry, lockin' the door behind me. Then I drops him into an easy chair, hands him a fresh light for his cigar, and camps down opposite.

"Now," says I, soothin' and confidential, "what's the game, Wilbur?"

"Eh?" says he, gawpin' at me.

"Mr. Brumby," says I, "it's time to 'fess up. Where'd you collect that tin detective badge?"

"I—I bought it," says he.

"Right!" says I. "Now we're comin' on. And you knew about this dinner party through overhearin' one side of a 'phone conversation this afternoon, didn't you?"

Wilbur's jaw goes slacker than ever. It's sort of a weak, foolish jaw, with the chin runnin' into the neck, and his eyes are the unsteady, shifty kind. "How—how did you know that?" says he.

"Simple," says I. "I was at the other end of the wire when Mr. Steele consulted you about Friday."

"Then," says he, starin' at me panicky, "you—you're Professor McCabe?"

"Uh-huh," says I. "And you're Wilbur Brumby, hero of that thrillin' yacht adventure when you was kidnapped by Pyramid Gordon. Got that out of some story magazine, didn't you?"

Wilbur nods. "Just what was the facts of your row with Pyramid?" I goes on. "You got the quick fire one mornin', I suppose, and came back at him with some loose talk, and then—what then, Wilbur?"

"He—he kicked me out," says Wilbur. "It was a way he had," says I. "But I ain't blamin' you for feedin' Steele with the kidnappin' yarn. He deserves it. And let's see—you work at some nickel-in-the-slot lunch place, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir," says Wilbur. "Accordin' to Mr. Steele you're some kind of manager," says I. "Managin' what?"

"The pies," says Wilbur. "Eh?" says I.

"I'm behind the partition," explains Wilbur. "When a customer takes out a pie in front, I fill it up."

"I see," says I. "You're the automatic pie loader, the man behind the mince. What sort of a job is that, Wilbur?"

"It—it's deadly, that's what it is!" he flares out peevish. "Try it yourself once.

Go in behind there at seven o'clock in the morning, and stand watching those blasted little pie shelves, minute by minute, hour after hour, until seven at night, when the other shift comes on! That's all you'll see in the pie pen,—them shelves in front and the pie racks behind you. Now there's Scutt Muller, of the sandwiches—he can gab all he wants with Becky Rabowitz on the dish-washin' machine, and Mrs. Moran at the tea and coffee urns. They're always at it. But I'm shut in with them blamed pies,—apple, cocoanut, pumpkin, and the rest. Can't even see the customers out front, and I only know when the rush hour begins by the way the shelves empty. It—it ain't human, that's all! I'm no machine. I got feelings and thoughts and—and—"

"And ambitions, eh?" says I, helpin' him out.

"Why, yes," says he; "of course—ambitions."

"Such as what?" says I.

"We-e-e-ll," says he kind of draggy, "I—I can't rightly tell maybe; but I—I want to see life, and be out where things are doing, and have folks know who I am; not hid away in a little pie coop where—"

"I get the idea," says I. "And after your talk with Mr. Steele he took you somewhere and blew you to a drink, didn't he?"

"To his club," says Wilbur.

"Made you feel like a reg'lar guy, that did, I expect," says I. "And when he left you you got to thinkin' about this dinner party of the Twombly-Cranes', eh?"

"I was wondering what it would be like, at a swell country house," admits Wilbur.

"So you hunts us up?" I goes on. "But from the road you couldn't get much of a view. Then you drifts in and—say, what was it gave you that burglar hunch, anyway?"

"A shadow on one of the upstairs window shades," he admits sheepish. "I thought I might be called into the dining room and asked to tell about it while they sent for the police. I didn't think the women would make such a holy row."

"What you wanted, Wilbur, was to pull a sensation, eh?" says I. "Ain't that about the size of it, now?"

"Ye-e-es, I suppose it was," says he. "But that's no crime, is it?"

"If it was," says I, "how many of us would be out of jail? But there's other ways, Wilbur, of achievin' the limelight besides throwin' a scare into a perfectly good dinner party. I'll admit you did it well. Makin' them footprints was an artistic touch. But you're wastin' your talents. Now how would you like, for instance, to chuck the pie department and go down to South America with a movin' picture comp'ny?"

"Honest?" gasps Wilbur.

"Straight goods," says I. "It's this way: Me and Mr. Steele are commissioned to do you a good turn on account of that bootin' you got from Gordon. And Steele, he's director in a concern that's just makin' up an outfit to go down there and cook up a big feature film. They're goin' to blow up a steamboat, wreck a biplane, start a forest fire, and get a thousand-foot reel of a hand-to-hand battle with a boa constrictor. If you'll take on the job, you can figure in a big sensation about four times a week. And think of the folks that'll be thrilled for months after, the thousands watchin' the screens—watchin' you! Eh? Now how about it?"

Wilbur's bat ears almost flutter with emotion as he leans forward listenin' eager. "Could—could you get me out past that fat woman?" he asks.

"The Countess? Sure!" says I.

"If you can, I'll take the job," says he.

I DID too, smugglin' him out through the back. But it took some explainin' to that indignant bunch of females when they found I'd turned him loose. Even after I've shown 'em how Wilbur only did it to create a little stir and get himself talked about, they was still mad as hops.

"The colossal impudence of him!" snorts Countess Carona. "Throwing us all into a panic merely to attract attention to his insignificant, contemptible self!"

"Ah, have a heart, Countess!" says I. "Ain't we all more or less hungry for the spotlight? Some of us gets in by carryin' banners at parades, others by wearin' a single-barreled eyeglass, and some by luggin' around chow dogs when they go visitin'. Now Wilbur—"

"Shorty," breaks in Sadie reprovin', "I think they want you in the billiard room."

They didn't, of course; but I finds a

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